

Veterinary Medical Ethics

Déontologie vétérinaire

Ethical question of the month – January 2009

Some opponents of animal rights object on religious grounds. This is likely because rights for animals are linked closely to perceptions of right and wrong and for many people religious beliefs determine the distinction between right and wrong. In the book of Genesis, God gives man dominion over animals. For some, this passage signals a sacred distinction between animals and man. To accept, therefore, that animals have rights seems to contradict this distinction. **If one believes that humans are given a sacred edict to hold dominion over animals, does this effectively negate any possibility that animals can have rights?**

Question de déontologie du mois – janvier 2009

Certains adversaires des droits des animaux s'objectent pour des raisons religieuses. Cela est probablement parce que les droits des animaux sont étroitement liés aux perceptions à l'égard du bien et du mal et que, pour beaucoup de personnes, les croyances religieuses déterminent la distinction entre le bien et le mal. Dans le livre de la Genèse, Dieu donne pouvoir de domination à l'homme sur les animaux. Pour certains, ce passage signale une distinction sacrée entre les animaux et l'homme. Par conséquent, le fait que les animaux possèdent des droits semble contredire cette distinction. **Si l'on croit que les humains ont le devoir sacré d'imposer leur volonté aux animaux, cela nie-t-il à toutes fins pratiques la possibilité que les animaux puissent avoir des droits?**

Comments/Commentaires :

Name/Nom :

Address/Adresse :

Responses to the case presented are welcome. Please limit your reply to approximately 50 words and forward along with your name and address to: **Ethical Choices, c/o Dr. Tim Blackwell, Veterinary Science, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Wellington Place, R.R.#1, Fergus, Ontario N1M 2W3; telephone: (519) 846-3413; fax: (519) 846-8101; e-mail: tim.blackwell@omaf.gov.on.ca**

Suggested ethical questions of the month are also welcome! All ethical questions or scenarios in the ethics column are based on actual events, which are changed, including names, locations, species, etc., to protect the confidentiality of the parties involved.

Les réponses au cas présenté sont les bienvenues. Veuillez limiter votre réponse à environ 50 mots et nous la faire parvenir par la poste avec vos nom et adresse à l'adresse suivante : **Choix déontologiques, a/s du Dr Tim Blackwell, Science vétérinaire, ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et des Affaires rurales de l'Ontario, R.R. 1, Fergus (Ontario) N1M 2W3; téléphone : (519) 846-3413; télécopieur : (519) 846-8101; courriel : tim.blackwell@omaf.gov.on.ca**

Les propositions de questions déontologiques sont toujours bienvenues! Toutes les questions et situations présentées dans cette chronique s'inspirent d'événements réels dont nous modifions certains éléments, comme les noms, les endroits ou les espèces, pour protéger l'anonymat des personnes en cause.

Ethical question of the month – October 2008

It has been reported that cats that spend some or all of their time out of doors are at greater risk of injuries and premature deaths. Despite these reports, many cat owners believe that their cats want to and should spend some of the day out of doors. Is it inhumane to allow a cat to go outside where increased risks of injury and death exist or is it inhumane to keep them inside against their will and natural instincts? Does the answer depend on whether the cat has ever been outside before in its life? Does the answer depend on the perceived relative risks of outdoor exposure, that is, traffic, predators, etc.?

Question de déontologie du mois – octobre 2008

Il a été signalé que les chats qui passent une partie ou la totalité de leur temps à l'extérieur s'exposent à un risque accru de blessures et de mort prématurée. Malgré cela, beaucoup de propriétaires croient que leur chat désire et devrait passer une partie de la journée à l'extérieur. Est-il inhumain de laisser sortir un chat lorsqu'il y a des risques accrus de blessures et de mort ou est-il inhumain de le garder à l'intérieur contre son gré et ses instincts naturels? Le fait que le chat ait déjà été ou non à l'extérieur influence-t-il la réponse? Et la réponse dépend-elle des risques relatifs perçus de l'exposition aux dangers présents à l'extérieur, c.-à-d. la circulation automobile, les prédateurs, etc.?

Comments

Living in New York City, I expect my clients to keep their cats indoors (usually on the 15th floor of an apartment building) without regards to the cat's desires.

While in residence in the city, I keep my cat indoors. When I reside in Rockland, Nova Scotia (population 105), my cat does indeed go outside and I admit I am nervous about her being beyond my total control.

The October ethical question seems to be client directed, rather than veterinary prompted. If we as veterinarians were asked how we would advise our clients, I would recuse myself from the issue as being an emotional decision on the part of each owner.

Harold M. Zweighaft, DVM, New York, New York

Largely for the purpose of making recommendations about de-worming and vaccination protocols, we started tracking our clients' cats for declarations of "exclusively indoor" versus "outdoors" (which included cats put outside on a leash). Sixty-one percent are indoor and 39% are outdoor by these definitions.

A common reason for cats peeing and pooping outside the litterbox is territory frustration. Letting those cats outside can save their lives from owners frustrated enough to consider euthanasia.

An outdoor life has risks for a cat — cars and other cats. As long as owners accept responsibility for those risks, I see no issue with them choosing to let their cats outside. The exception is where those cats violate the reasonable right of neighbors to enjoy their own properties because of foul odors, noise, or property destruction.

G. Goeree, DVM, MSc, Animal Hospital of Kitchener-Waterloo, Kitchener, Ontario

Humans indulge in activities such as sky-diving that are associated with some risk, but we accept reasonable risk as a trade-off for the benefits we experience from engaging in these activities. It is not inhumane to extend similar freedoms to our animal companions. A cat that has a strong wish to go outdoors is likely happier when given the freedom to do so. Provided the outdoor environment is not unduly hazardous, I think the potential benefit to the cat justifies a slightly increased risk of premature demise.

Diane McKelvey, DVM, Dip ABVP (feline), Kamloops, British Columbia

An ethicist's commentary on keeping cats indoors "for their own good"

I have no reason whatever to reject the premise on which this question is founded. It seems obvious that confining a cat is likely to prolong the animal's life. What is necessary to examine is whether, from the cat's perspective, the prolongation of life is worth the price paid.

As I have written extensively elsewhere, we have no reason to believe that an animal values life per se. Animals do not appear to have the cognitive apparatus to form long-term projects, or to formulate long-term goals, such as wanting to see Ireland again, see their grandchildren graduate, or finish a novel. What

seems to matter more to animals is their quality of life while lived. This seems intuitively obvious to common sense when it condemns an owner prolonging the life of a suffering animal because the owner selfishly cannot "let go" or when it finds high-confinement agriculture distasteful, even when told that the confined sow, for example, gets more feed than a sow under extensive conditions, escapes bites from other sows, has no worry about predation, and is protected from extremes of climates.

In my view, following Aristotle, an animal has a telos, a nature, what can be characterized as the "pigness" of the pig,

the “cowness” of the cow. The telos is the set of evolved powers and interests that enable it to live out its life in its ecological niche. Essentially, behind this esoteric metaphysical notion is the insight that “fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly.”

Pigs are social animals, evolved for rooting on soft loam. Cattle and sheep are herd grazing animals. Under the agriculture that reigned for 10 000 years, guided by the concept of good husbandry, farmers or shepherds or ranchers allowed the animals to live as they had evolved in the most optimal circumstances they could place them, and then augmented their ability to survive and thrive by provision of food during famine, water during drought, protection from predation, medical attention and so on. Under confinement agriculture, we lost husbandry and forced square pegs into round holes, severing productivity from welfare.

The cat is fundamentally a nocturnal predator, built to see well in the dark, roam, stalk patiently and silently, and attack with suddenness and ferocity. Unlike the dog, it is a solitary, rather than a pack animal.

If we keep a cat indoors, full time, we abort the exercise of its “catness,” as surely as the confinement swine producer aborts the pigness of the pig. By doing so, one transforms a genuine animal life into protoplasmic endurance. A cat kept full time in a house is no more a cat than a sow kept full time in a sow stall is a pig.

Consider, too, that humans would probably live longer if we strictly controlled their diet, and forbade them from racing or even riding motorcycles, snowboarding, playing football, boxing, and myriad other activities. None of these is programmed into human nature, yet people would deem it intolerable were we to forbid them from partaking in such activities on the grounds that they would live longer. How much the more so, then, for animals, where such activities are absolute requirements of their biological natures? In any case, keeping the cat indoors is very likely more an expression of our selfish desire to keep our pet alive than it is a concern for the well-being of the cat.

Bernard E. Rollin, PhD